

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

601 NEW JERSEY AVENUE, NW

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WASHINGTON, DC 20001

December 8, 2005

SECRETARY OF LABOR,	:	
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH	:	
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA)	:	Docket No. KENT 2006-18
	:	A.C. No. 15-18808-60638
v.	:	
	:	
PREMIER ELKHORN COAL COMPANY	:	

BEFORE: Duffy, Chairman; Jordan, Suboleski, and Young, Commissioners

ORDER

BY THE COMMISSION:

This matter arises under the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977, 30 U.S.C. § 801 et seq. (2000) (“Mine Act”). On October 14, 2005, the Commission received from Premier Elkhorn Coal Company (“Premier Elkhorn”) a motion made by counsel to reopen a penalty assessment that had become a final order of the Commission pursuant to section 105(a) of the Mine Act, 30 U.S.C. § 815(a).

Under section 105(a) of the Mine Act, an operator who wishes to contest a proposed penalty must notify the Secretary of Labor no later than 30 days after receiving the proposed penalty assessment. If the operator fails to notify the Secretary, the proposed penalty assessment is deemed a final order of the Commission. 30 U.S.C. § 815(a).

On June 29, 2005, the Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (“MSHA”) issued a proposed penalty assessment to Premier Elkhorn for a citation issued to the company by MSHA on May 19, 2005. Mot. at 1. Premier Elkhorn states in its motion that it had already timely contested the citation. *Id.* That contest is the subject of Docket No. KENT 2005-307-R, which is currently on stay before Commission Administrative Law Judge Avram Weisberger. Premier Elkhorn states that it failed to timely contest the proposed penalty assessment at issue because the assessment erroneously included another citation and Premier Elkhorn believed that a corrected assessment would follow. *Id.* The Secretary states that she does not oppose Premier Elkhorn’s request for relief.

We have held that in appropriate circumstances, we possess jurisdiction to reopen uncontested assessments that have become final Commission orders under section 105(a). *Jim Walter Res., Inc.*, 15 FMSHRC 782, 786-89 (May 1993) (“*JWR*”). In evaluating requests to reopen final section 105(a) orders, the Commission has found guidance in Rule 60(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure under which, for example, a party could be entitled to relief from a final order of the Commission on the basis of inadvertence or mistake. *See* 29 C.F.R. § 2700.1(b) (“the Commission and its Judges shall be guided so far as practicable by the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure”); *JWR*, 15 FMSHRC at 787. We have also observed that default is a harsh remedy and that, if the defaulting party can make a showing of good cause for a failure to timely respond, the case may be reopened and appropriate proceedings on the merits permitted. *See Coal Prep. Servs., Inc.*, 17 FMSHRC 1529, 1530 (Sept. 1995).

Having reviewed Premier Elkhorn’s motion, in the interests of justice, we remand this matter to the Chief Administrative Law Judge for a determination of whether good cause exists for Premier Elkhorn’s failure to timely contest the penalty proposal and whether relief from the final order should be granted. If it is determined that such relief is appropriate, this case shall proceed pursuant to the Mine Act and the Commission’s Procedural Rules, 29 C.F.R. Part 2700.

Michael F. Duffy, Chairman

Mary Lu Jordan, Commissioner

Stanley C. Suboleski, Commissioner

Michael G. Young, Commissioner

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